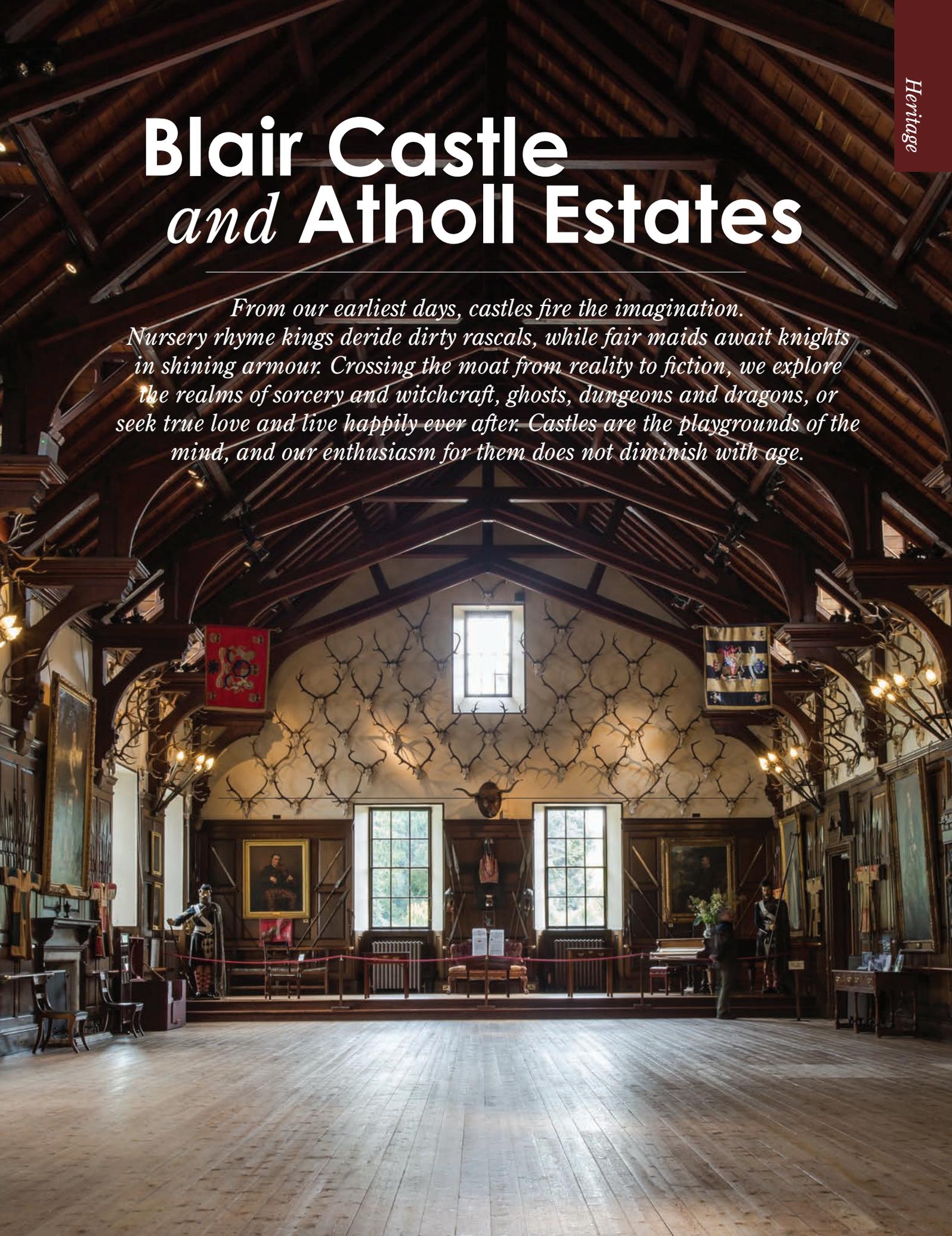


Blair Castle *and* Atholl Estates

From our earliest days, castles fire the imagination. Nursery rhyme kings deride dirty rascals, while fair maids await knights in shining armour. Crossing the moat from reality to fiction, we explore the realms of sorcery and witchcraft, ghosts, dungeons and dragons, or seek true love and live happily ever after. Castles are the playgrounds of the mind, and our enthusiasm for them does not diminish with age.





So it was, that once upon a time - not so very long ago - I headed north through the enchanted land of Perthshire in search of Blair Castle. In the deep, dark forests near Pitlochry, I spotted its imposing white walls topped with turrets, crow-stepped gables, pitched slated roofs, tall chimneys, and crenellated towers, all punching through the shadowy green envelope of trees.

Blair Castle is the focal point of Atholl Estates that once covered 350,000 acres (141,640 hectares) of the Scottish Highlands. Founded almost 750 years ago, the current building, with its many subsequent alterations and additions, occupies a once-strategically important site in the strath of Garry, the main route through the Grampians between Perth and Inverness. Today, the estate covers 145,000 acres (58,680 hectares), making it one of the largest in Scotland.

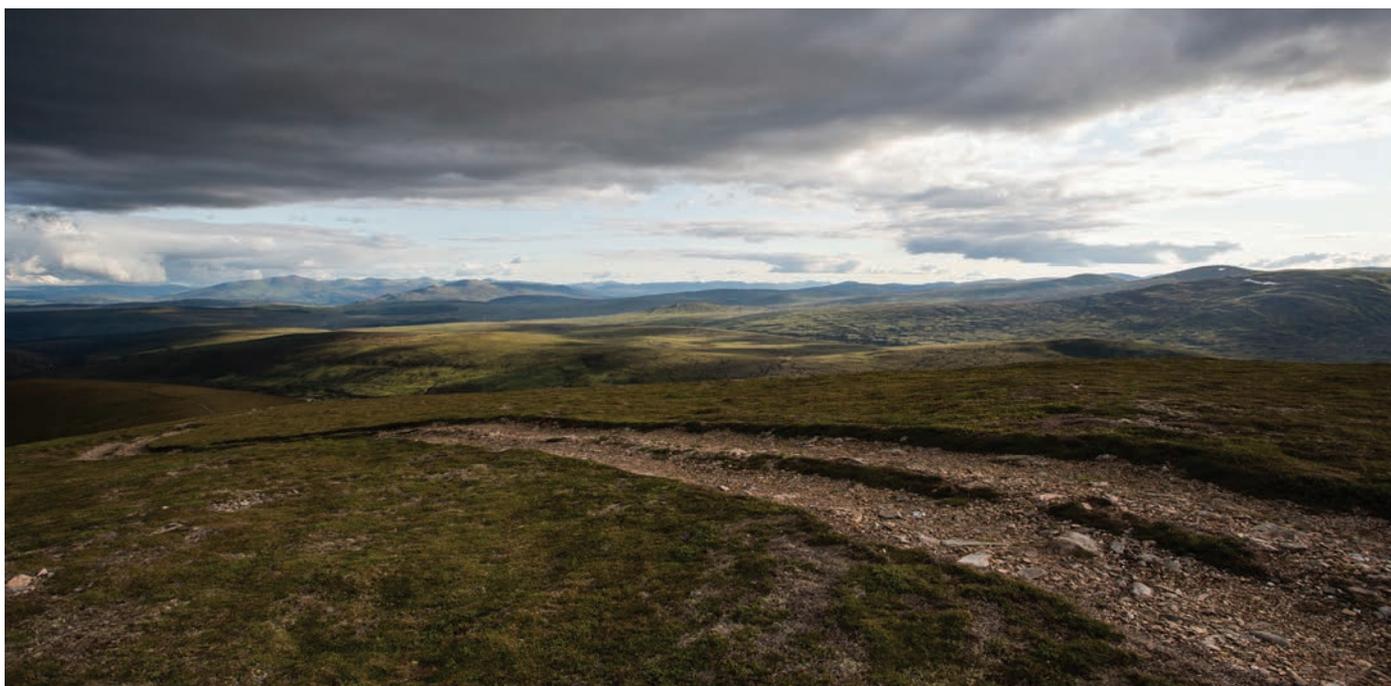
James II of Scotland granted the earldom of Atholl to his half brother, Sir John Stewart, in 1457. It was then passed to the Murray lineage in 1629, where it remains to this day. The second Murray Earl was granted the Marquis of Atholl title in 1676, and the second Marquis of Atholl became its first Duke in 1703. Like many families, the Stewarts and Murrays of Atholl have seen their fair share of romance, love, wars and in-fighting. All of these things have shaped the history of this place, but it is ultimately the families' success that has created both the estate I now pass through and the imposing castle, whose doors stand open before me.

Inside the Baronial-style entrance hall, walls festooned with swords, shields, rifles, bayonets and body armour confront me. It is a stark reminder of my nation's turbulent past, and a symbol of the power that is Blair Castle's heritage. I tour through rooms of impressive dimensions, bedecked with elaborate plasterwork, and filled with heirloom treasures.

Unlike many such collections, these are not objects gathered impersonally from disparate corners of the globe. Rather, they reveal a more intimate story of those who have passed through these walls. Magnificent portrait and landscape paintings, musical instruments, hand crafted furniture, and stunning embroidery work tell tales of how its inhabitants lived, worked and played.

Famous guests - both invited and uninvited - have stayed at Blair Castle, including Mary Queen of Scots in 1564, Oliver Cromwell's troops, who seized the spot in 1650, and John Graham - Viscount "Bonnie Dundee" - who conquered the castle for the Jacobites in 1689, and whose body was returned to the premises later that same year following the Battle of Killiecrankie. There were further sieges of Blair Castle by both Government and Jacobite troops during the 1745-46 uprising. Robert Burns stayed here in 1787, and it was following a visit to the nearby Falls of Bruar that the Bard, moved by the lack of vegetation around the waterfalls, wrote one of his lesser-known works, *The Humble Petition of Bruar Water*.

Undoubtedly, the castle's most famous visitor was Queen Victoria, who stayed here for three weeks in 1844. Impressed by the





way the Duke's men, The Atholl Highlanders, looked after her, she presented them with colours - giving them the right to bear arms, thus creating the only private army to exist in Europe today.

Keen to explore the wider estate, I joined former head gamekeeper Sandy Reid for a guided tour of the rolling Atholl hills. Reid came to the estate from Aberdeen when he was only fifteen years old. He began as a pony boy, looking after the Highland ponies used to bring culled deer off the hills, and he continued working here for over fifty-five years before retiring. He still helps out during the summer months, running tractor rides and Land Rover safaris. As we drive up the hills behind Blair Castle, Reid knows exactly where to find red deer, black grouse, golden plovers, hen harriers and mountain hares.

The main field-sport on the estate is red deer stalking, which doubles as a part of its deer control program. In the absence of natural predators, the population of wild red deer that roam the Scottish Highlands must be managed. Atholl Estates is a member of a regional deer management group, monitoring populations and recommending culls to member estates in order to maintain a healthy balance between habitat, deer welfare and economic sustainability.

The estate also offers grouse shooting. Grouse populations run in cycles, controlled by their densities. If numbers get too high they become diseased, and the population plummets. Culling maintains the optimum number for breeding. Additionally, salmon and trout fishing opportunities are available on rivers and lochs around the area. The estate also controls predators - mainly foxes and carrion crows that live off ground nesting birds such as grouse, golden plover and hen harriers.

I asked Reid about the biggest changes he had seen over the years. Tapping the dashboard of the Land Rover, he replied, "Mechanization, and the vehicles in particular. It is so much easier to move over large areas now. Also, modern all-weather clothing is so much better than in the past when everything got wet, heavy and had to be cleaned and dried out."

We got out of the vehicle at 2,750ft (838M) in the Atholl Hills. From this domain of the golden eagles, I could see the vastness of the estate all around me, and I pondered the responsibility and economic challenges that go with such custodianship.

"The biggest issue is maintaining income flow to keep up with operating costs," notes Andrew Bruce Wootton, who has been general manager at Atholl Estates since 2000. "Service charges, material costs and changes in regulations all increase much faster than rents and trading revenues."

As with many modern businesses, diversification is needed to tap into additional income streams. "Tourism - the castle, park, lodges, functions, events and field sports - and hydro electricity make up about 60% of our turnover," he confirms. "Forestry, farming, let farming, let affordable housing, and property development make up the balance."

The estate caters well to its visitors. There are excellent accommodations in traditional Victorian and modern timber lodges, along with a 300-space caravan and camping park set in stunning, mature parkland. The recently restored Hercules Garden, with its Chinese Bridge, summerhouse and lily ponds, provides a tranquil environment for visitors and wildlife alike.

Wootton notes the estate's education program. "Our most significant educational activity is the provision of a ranger service, which is active in the local schools and communities, running programs both in and out of their curriculum. We also work with the Wilderness Foundation to provide camping breaks on the estate for disadvantaged children from urban areas."

Although the domain hosts events throughout the year, Wootton says that this year's horse trials are of particular significance. "We have hosted a three day event for over 25 years, and have been recognized by the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI) for over 20 years. In 2008 we became a Concours Complet International (CCI) triple-star event, one of only four in the UK. This year, between the 9th and 12th of September, we are hosting the FEI European Championships. This is the last opportunity for nations to qualify for the 2016 Olympics. We are expecting around 60,000 people through the gate for this - almost twice our normal attendance figure."

Blair Castle is definitely a jewel in the Perthshire crown, and I left Atholl Estates much enlightened about its history and the men and women who shaped it.

*Words and photos by Tom Langlands
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